

Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

Legal Aid Society helps decode legal gobbletygook

By Christina Chanes Nystrom

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Lisa Harris of Chino wanted to know how to access either Social Security or disability benefits for her mother who is ill and living with her. But the legal jargon surrounding the application process was something she felt she could not handle alone.

Harris went straight to the Chino Senior Center to get legal advice from Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino, which offers legal aid to low-income families and seniors who live in the city.

"Trying to figure out the application to file is not only a nightmare it's very stressful," said Harris. "My mother is on eight different types of medications and we need help accessing services for her so that we can get some help paying for them."

Harris said that getting the legal advice will help to arm her for the battle ahead in gaining the necessary benefits for her mother.

"The attorney here has been great and has given me enough information to so that I can walk in to the Social Security office and I'm ready to handle it," said Harris. "I have the weapons I need to assist me so that I can in turn help her."

The Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino is funded in part by Inland Counties Legal Services, which also works to help those who cannot afford legal service.

"I tell people who come here that I put right what once went wrong. I once heard that somewhere and it accurately portrays what I do," said Kevin Ford, one of the staff attorneys who works for the Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino.

"Sometimes we offer assistance in cases of elderly abuse, eviction or family law. It just depends on the needs of the person accessing our legal aid services," said Ford, adding that he also serves families in the Rancho Cucamonga area once a week.

"I enjoy my work and am in the Chino Senior Center once a month and every Wednesday I'm available to help families in need at the Rancho YMCA," said Ford. "When people are scared and fearful their lives get really bad and sometimes out of control. By coming here and accessing services through our office, we can put the fear aside and help explain what they need to do legally."

Ford said he often solves problems for people who would otherwise be in a no-win situation. Because low-income families and seniors can access legal aid through Legal

Aid Society of San Bernardino, he can help to put fears aside and guide families on the right track.

Ford said he sees more than 400 families per year at the Chino Senior Center. He also said that in Rancho Cucamonga he sees more than 2,100 families per year and that he enjoys helping those who need help.

The Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino also serves families in the cities of Etiwanda, Alta Loma, Ontario, Fontana and Rialto.

"I try to help people whenever I can," said Ford. "In Rancho we do everything from will preparation to divorce and child support issues. In Chino I work more often than not on seniors issues, but no matter what the problem we are here to help families get through the process."

Ford said that senior issues could include anything and everything from accessing healthcare to the transfer of property as well as living trusts.

"Believe it or not there is an increased number of seniors being evicted and that can not only be frightening, it can also be difficult for them to understand so, we are here to help them," said Ford. "We also see a lot of families that are working on guardianship issues." Ford said many grandparents today are taking care of their grandchildren and need to get guardianship to access healthcare services for the children of whom they have custody and are living in their home.

Marion Melby, supervisor of the Chino Senior Center, said one of the nice things about the legal aid service offered to seniors and low-income families is that it gives them the knowledge and assistance they need to tackle issues they face.

"It's a great service and what we do is help to take the appointments so that when they come here to see clients, they know how many they will be serving that day," said Melby, adding the they service is available free of charge the third Wednesday of each month. To find out more about The Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino for all of the cities other than Chino, call (909) 889-7328. To book an appointment with the Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino at the city of Chino Senior Center, call (909) 591-9836.